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INFO RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 0400
RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 8524
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN 0125
RUCNDTA/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0099
RUEAUSA/DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION WASHDC
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000366

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2029

TAGS: [ECON](#) [EDU](#) [EG](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [RP](#) [SA](#) [SCUL](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN JEDDAH:
EXPANDING U.S.-EGYPTIAN PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

REF: RIYADH 1278

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Taking advantage of visits to Jeddah for the opening of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale and Ambassador Smith met September 24 with Egyptian Minister of Higher Education Dr. Hany Helal. They discussed how the Egyptian government hopes to expand educational programs with the United States, particularly in the areas of science and technology (S&T) and English language teaching (ELT). Dr. Helal also expressed disappointment over the unsuccessful candidacy of Egyptian Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni for the post of UNESCO Director General and linked the loss to a Western campaign against the Egyptian candidate. END SUMMARY.

EGYPT'S UNESCO BID: BROKEN DREAMS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

¶2. (C) Immediately after pleasantries with Ambassador Smith and U/S McHale, Dr. Helal broached Egypt's recent unsuccessful bid for the post of UNESCO Director General. Without rancor, Helal nonetheless made clear his disappointment over fellow minister Hosni's loss, which he attributed to U.S. and European pressure on the 58-member UNESCO board to block the nomination.

S&T: LEADING THE WAY OUT OF "INNOVATION'S VALLEY OF DEATH"

¶3. (C) Helal moved on to the Egyptian government's efforts to promote interest in S&T among the younger generation through informal science education and online tools. Of these efforts, he highlighted two: ongoing negotiations to air Arabic language Discovery Channel programming in Egypt, and launching "ScienceBook," an Egyptian-managed and hosted social-networking platform. U/S McHale responded positively to the minister's initiatives for using new-media tools for S&T education, and further proposed using the same technology to connect American and Egyptian students at the classroom level to promote innovative collaboration. The Under Secretary gave an example of a Pakistani software developer

who recently collaborated with MIT on an application that delivers medical advice via mobile telephones from Pakistani-American doctors in the United States to patients in the Buner Valley. Minister Helal described a similar telemedicine program through video conferencing between Alexandria and Siwa Oasis. U/S McHale also explained how children's interest in science falls off precipitously after elementary school, based on her experience (prior to joining State) as a member of the Maryland Board of Education and as head of Discovery Communications. She therefore began the "Discovery Young Science Challenge" to promote interest in science in middle school. Minister Helal was enthusiastic about this approach, and U/S McHale said that she would provide more information on it.

14. (C) Turning to Egypt's current S&T programs with the U.S., Helal specifically mentioned the Fulbright Commission and the S&T association agreement. The minister proposed that the Fulbright Commission in Cairo shift its focus from social sciences to S&T. Helal added that the Commission's traditional focus on the former was causing many controversies in Egypt, particularly with Fulbright scholars researching what he called "sensitive issues, such as minorities in Egypt." As for the S&T association agreement, currently in its 14th cycle, the minister noted that most of the projects funded through the agreement are focused on theoretical sciences, while he hopes that the focus will shift to practical applications.

15. (U) Helal identified the main challenges to S&T development in Egypt as the lack of human resources and the gap between scientific research and production. To close the gap in the "innovation cycle's valley of death," as he put it, the University of Texas at Austin identified 40 projects,

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out of which Egypt selected the four most marketable for implementation. Ambassador Smith pointed out that due to profit motivation, private industry is better suited to bridge the research-to-production gap. U/S McHale reiterated her focus on using government as a catalyst to connect scientific institutions and the private sector to address this problem. To that end, the minister mentioned that IBM is partnering with Cairo University to establish a nanotechnology center on campus. Helal expressed enthusiasm for the idea of partnering with U.S. universities to create "centers of excellence" in Egypt.

16. (U) In 2006, Egypt started a 10-year S&T education program called the 'S&T Diplomacy Initiative.' The program provides full scholarships to Egyptian science graduate students to earn an advanced degree from the partnering country. The initiative started with Germany in 2006, Japan in 2007, Italy in 2008, and France in 2009. Currently, there are 500 Egyptian PhD students studying in Japan, and the number of Egyptian graduate students in Germany increased by 350 over the past year as a result of the initiative. The Ministry proposed partnering with the United States; however, it faced some coordination difficulties due to the fact that S&T education is not federally managed in the United States.

LANGUAGE EXCHANGES TO REMOVE CULTURAL BARRIERS

17. (U) Dr. Helal attributed the current cultural misunderstanding between Egypt and the United States to the language barrier. He stressed the need for self-learning English language kits and online learning tools due to the lack of qualified English teachers in Egypt. He also mentioned that Alexandria University currently runs a program for American students to learn Arabic for one year, after which the university employs them as teaching assistants in social science departments for an additional year.

EGYPTIAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S.

¶18. (C) U/S McHale asked Helal about perceptions of the United States in Egypt. Minister Helal qualified his answer by saying that it was a difficult question to address due to "the region's long history." (Note: While not stated as such, we believe Helal was referring to the Arab-Israeli conflict. End note.) He mentioned Ambassador Scobey's frequent meetings with Egyptian students at Cairo University, where she is often asked whether U.S. foreign policy in the region is fair. Ambassador Smith responded by highlighting the USG's recognition of the importance of global public opinion as exemplified by President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech, in which he posited respect, trust, and listening to the people of the region as the basis of the Administration's dialogue with the Muslim world. Ambassador Smith added that changing public opinion in the region will take time, to which the minister reiterated the importance of the bilateral relationship and added that the current cabinet comprises "a group of reformers, not politicians," but said they are confronting growing resistance to reform in Egypt.

¶19. (C) Helal, echoed by two of his aides, opined that the U.S. Congress and American media are not well informed about the region, and are one-sided in gathering information. Concerning the debate over health-care reform in the U.S., Helal's view was that President Obama is promoting a cultural change in the country, and that it is not clear if he is -- or will be -- successful in his efforts. U/S McHale commented that the ongoing debate on health-care reform is more a sign of a healthy democracy than of resistance to the President's efforts, adding, "Democracy is a messy business."

KAUST: AMBITIOUS, BUT IS IT TRULY SAUDI?

¶10. (C) Minister Helal headed the Egyptian delegation for the official inauguration of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) on September 23. Qen asked to share his impressions of the new university, he expressed concern

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about the lack of human resources in Saudi Arabia. He mentioned that most of the faculty and staff who work at Saudi universities are foreigners, "the majority of whom are Egyptian nationals." He compared KAUST to King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, which opened in Dhahran in 45 years ago (as the College of Petroleum and Minerals) with similarly ambitious goals. Despite his concerns, Helal said that with 70,000 Saudi students holding U.S. university degrees (the same figure that Saudi Minister of Oil and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of KAUST Ali al-Naimi used during the inauguration ceremony), KAUST might be able to add (more) U.S.-educated Saudis to its faculty and staff.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Throughout the meeting, Minister Helal appeared genuinely interested in partnering with the United States on an array of S&T and English language teaching and teacher-training programs. While he also raised the issue of Egypt's failed UNESCO bid several times -- the results of the final round of voting for the UNESCO chair were made public just prior to the meeting with Ambassador Smith and U/S McHale, the three principals used most of the 70-minute meeting to discuss broad ideas as well as some specifics on expanding bilateral cooperation in key educational and other public diplomacy fields. END COMMENT.

¶12. (U) U/S McHale has approved this message.
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